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Miriam Gamble on Alex Wylie's 'A Letter From Polème'

A Letter from Polème by Alex Wylie

This Year of Good God 1790 (blighted
be its annal!) year of common
rule, uncommon riot; the old ways rutted-at,
untenable, I rode southward

three nights, saddle-weary, well passed.
How slowly came I here! How masterfully kept
my back straight on the straight road back
to Hell – such wrought enormities housed in this place! –
dreaming of the green walks to come,
his gardens rustling rustic fictions in my brain.

The Count coddled me in rich wine.
I watched him lace the air and palated my quiet,
movement being air made flesh, flesh
unspeakable. Like an anxious shade, the candles
cast me on his lordship, arranged
thereon the wight of his lost house, an alien
cadenza playing on itself
(Nota, the question of the sum is yet unfixed
&c. &c.
the Count is more distraught, abstracted, these last days –
if this seems strange I am sorry)

He admires my selflessness and confessed as much;
I confess in faith, coming to
his point of view, I admire him for saying so.
Quixote of your riven sky,
O Moon! Enmantled yet, my comprador of light!
For I would not alert my host
to this my writing – there is a weird, subtle wire
binds me to this blasted helix,
a thing of Youth with scant attachment to the world
taking account of dead money.

(Tempered in the hissing wine, the will – iron, but hot –
is forged and bent. See! in the glass
grows a dawn of iron, as wine passing hot through blood;
as through a washed-up, half-drowned wretch.
Dribbling white sand, he dreams himself a golden mouth.
Yet politicking with the Count,
I count myself, of late, with the dreamers, lying
earth-hooked, tracing his lineaments
on ruin'd cloud)
For what dim purpose came I so
slip-shoddy into Hell? Through purpose, accident,
I am quite utterly absorbed –
his kindness adversarial compels me here –
the Oleanders spike my heart
like Opium – the Count coddles me,
holding me in usufruct as in rich wine
(writing in the dark is seldom easy, my friend)

from New Poetries V © Alex Wylie

"if this seems strange I am sorry." Many of Alex Wylie's poems *are* very strange, and 'A Letter from Polème' is no exception. In fact, it may be the oddest one I know – vocally, syntactically, down even to the very question of what is going on and what we are supposed to 'take' from it.

These are not, however, criticisms, and the above-quoted apology, though partly in earnest, is only partly so. With most of Wylie's poems, and emphatically here, we are asked to enter the world of the voice almost entirely on its own terms. In fact, this is one of the main drivers behind the poems. They are voices from nowhere, placed somewhere, and trying to communicate. This poem is not in 'Wylie's' voice, but that doesn't necessarily set it apart. It is not an exercise in mimicry, a workshop entity, so much as a problematic means of self-expression, exploration, through the vehicle of another. Another way of saying that is that, although faked, the voice is entirely genuine and the distinction between voice and poet muddy.

On one level, 'A Letter from Polème' is a gothic romp, an anti-pretension piss-take of characters like Stoker's Jonathan Harker – earnest penners in the diary of self-important thoughts and 'unusual' experiences. Wylie loves rhetoric, but is suspicious of it, so he glories in this opportunity to give his lyrical skills full rein (without having to take the rap) in lines like "the old ways rutted-at, / untenable" and "Dribbling white sand, he dreams himself a golden mouth".

Yet, as that last line suggests, there is a wistfulness at play for the very 'pretension' which he seems to knock. This image, like many in Wylie's poems, is in fact profoundly beautiful, and captures with succinctness the central dilemma of his art. Prophecy and the yen for 'knowledge' are prominent themes – in, for example, the "moonstruck man" in 'The Star and the Ditch' – and suggest, in the very mode of their expression, the sense that, at its best, humanity is a glorious, a wonder-inspiring thing. On the other hand, they are simultaneously qualified or cut down by both context and irony. Or perhaps the context *is* the irony. Stars always have a ditch to go along with them, the 'light' its opposite number in 'dust'. And the seeker after 'beauty' or 'truth' is always overseen by a gallery of disapproving livers by commonsense, with whom Wylie is not entirely unsympathetic. In some cases, as in 'Jericho', the reader is included in that gallery. Does he distrust his reader? I think he does; I also think he's right to. His poems are difficult to understand because they are uncompromising, refuse to pay their tithe in common currency – common in the sense of 'shared'. They're dispatches from the interior, hard-won, fiercely honest and always, of necessity, partly opaque. To use his own words, the poem is "an alien / cadenza playing on itself" – aware of its aloneness, trying to speak, but not willing to tell untruths to do so.

The gothic offers us a world turned upside down, turned against the accepted world, both as pure antagonism and as a means of showing the latter to itself. Wylie has a foot in both camps, and grants them equal 'reality', just as Lorca did the dream against the 'real'. Past critics have found him difficult to write on, and have blamed him rather than themselves, which is mistaken. We shouldn't be trying to sum these poems up. Rather, we should accept that they *are* difficult (though also very pure), and that, if we lack the critical vocabulary to pigeon-hole them, that is down to the uselessness of pigeon-holes, and also part of his point.

Miriam Gamble's first collection, *The Squirrels Are Dead* (Bloodaxe), received a Somerset Maugham Award in 2011.

Posted by EJ at 08:00 No comments:



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